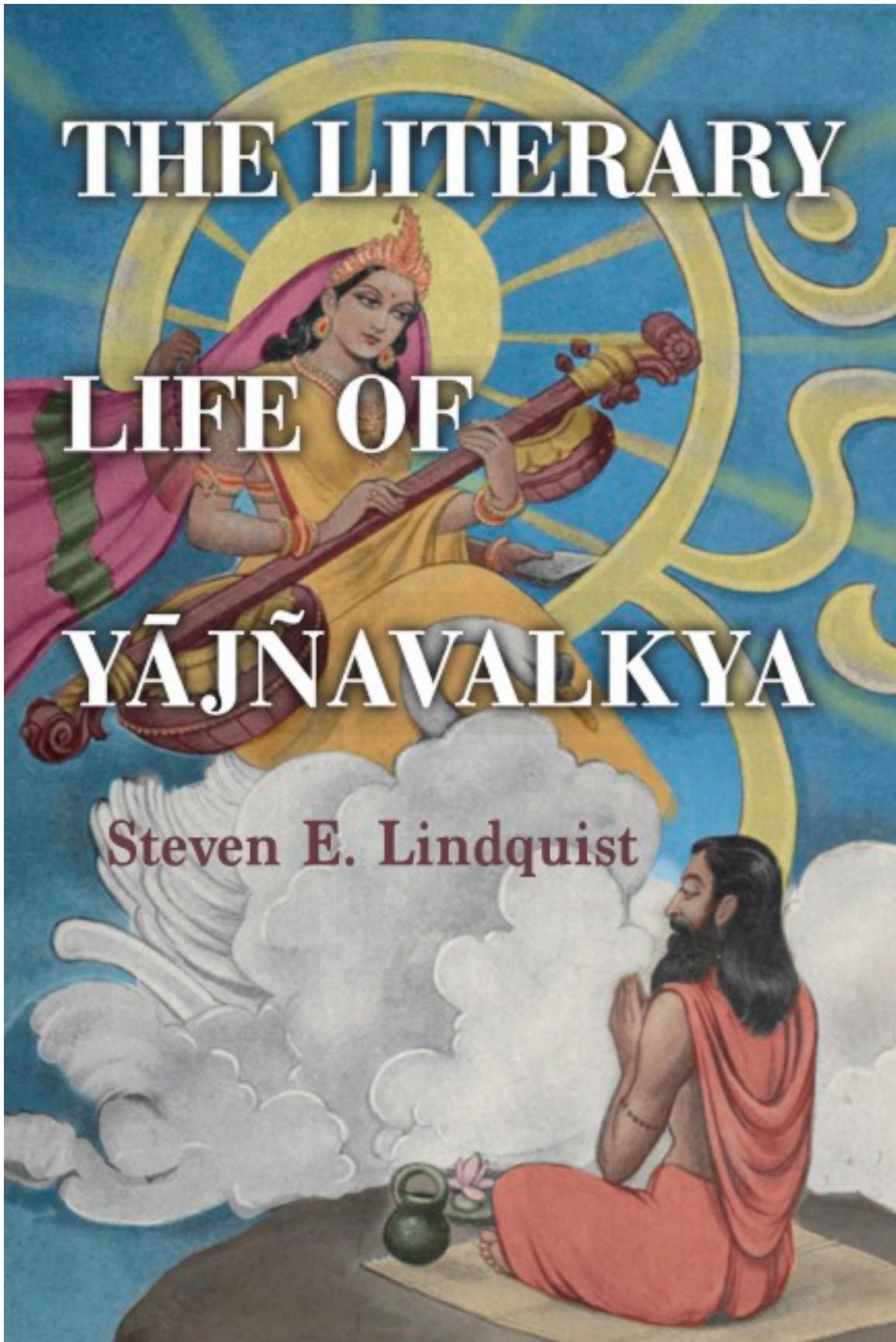


THE LITERARY LIFE OF YĀJÑAVALKYA

Steven E. Lindquist





The Literary Life of Yājñavalkya



SUNY series in Hindu Studies

Wendy Doniger, editor





The Literary Life of Yājñavalkya



STEVEN E. LINDQUIST



**SUNY
PRESS**



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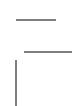
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There is some truth to the platitude that no person is an island, but if I may modify this slightly (with tongue planted firmly in cheek), he or she *is* a subcontinent.

I view the history of the Indian subcontinent—and in the book before you, the literary life of Yājñavalkya—as a complex and varied interaction of peoples and the objects they produce; of intersecting ideologies, aspirations, material interests, alliances, conflicts, and frustratingly, but inevitably, a degree of historical chance that remains elusive to analysis. I am keenly aware that any attempt to make a cohesive narrative out of a small aspect of this complexity—in my case, one literary figure in the religious history of what is known as Hinduism today—must be, by definition, incomplete. This incompleteness is often a cause of frustration to scholars, and indeed it is that frustration that propels many of us forward. But, at the end of the day, I think, there is a certain poetic beauty to realizing that humans, their literary products, and their history are ultimately irreducible to any single narrative or final interpretation.

This is as true of the texts and people we study as of ourselves. As I think of the path that led to this book, I cannot help but get lost in the matrix of mentors, colleagues, friends, and family who have played a role in my academic trajectory, though a role that can be opaque, sometimes to both of us. Like with the stories of Yājñavalkya, I find myself connecting various dots in my own autobiographical thinking and realize that any such story can be told in different ways and each version can be satisfying in its own right. Though I am convinced I have left out significant influences, I hope my preamble makes clear that this is not intentional in the least and is probably inevitable.

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kindness, love, and patience. In one sense, producing a book is like 39
40

1 raising a child—with the care, love, defensiveness, and frustration that
2 comes along with it—and Lisa has been an ideal intellectual co-parent.
3 This metaphorical child, though, has since been supplanted by an
4 actual one, and both our co-parenting and her steadfastness continues.
5 My son, Evan, has taught me more about life in a few short years
6 than I could have imagined. Though he has repeatedly distracted my
7 attention from actually getting “that paper” done, my debt is to him.
8 To return to the metaphor from the start: a subcontinent—though
9 possessing the intricacies of connections between lands, peoples, and
10 cultures—like a person, ultimately stands on its own. Everything in
11 this book, while deeply influenced by so many, is fundamentally my
12 own doing. Any weakness or flaw is mine alone.

13

14 I dedicate this book to the memory of my loving father,
15 Reynold Lindquist (1939–2023).

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Abbreviations

AGS	<i>Aśvalāyana Gṛhyasūtra</i>	1
AP	<i>Agni Purāṇa</i>	2
ĀpDhS	<i>Āpastamba Dharmasūtra</i>	3
AV	<i>Atharvāveda</i>	4
BĀU	<i>Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad</i>	5
BĀUK	<i>Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (Kāṇva)</i>	6
BĀUM	<i>Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad (Mādhyandina)</i>	7
BĀUBhā	<i>Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad Bhāṣya</i>	8
BaudhDhS	<i>Baudhāyana Dharmasūtra</i>	9
BhG	<i>Bhagavadgītā</i>	10
BhP	<i>Bhāgavata Purāṇa</i>	11
CU	<i>Chāndogya Upaniṣad</i>	12
BP	<i>Brahmāṇḍa Purāṇa</i>	13
GauDhS	<i>Gautama Dharmasūtra</i>	14
JB	<i>Jaiminīya Brāhmaṇa</i>	15
KP	<i>Kūrma Purāṇa</i>	16
KS	<i>Kāthaka Saṃhitā</i>	17
KṣB	<i>Kauśītaki Brāhmaṇa</i>	18
KṣU	<i>Kauśītaki Upaniṣad</i>	19
LP	<i>Liṅga Purāṇa</i>	20
MārkP	<i>Mārkaṇḍeya Purāṇa</i>	21
MBh	<i>Mahābhārata</i>	22
PP	<i>Padma Purāṇa</i>	23
PrU	<i>Praśna Upaniṣad</i>	24
RV	<i>R̥gveda</i>	25
ŚB	<i>Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa</i>	26
ŚBK	<i>Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa (Kāṇva)</i>	27

1	ŚBM	<i>Śatapatha Brāhmaṇa</i> (Mādhyandina)
2	SP	<i>Skanda Purāṇa</i>
3	SV	<i>Sāmaveda</i>
4	TB	<i>Taittirīya Brāhmaṇa</i>
5	TS	<i>Taittirīya Saṃhitā</i>
6	VaDhS	<i>Vasiṣṭha Dharmasūtra</i>
7	VāP	<i>Vāyu Purāṇa</i>
8	VP	<i>Viṣṇu Purāṇa</i>
9	VS	<i>Vājasaneyā Saṃhitā</i>
10	VVRI	Vishveshvaranand Vedic Research Institute (Vedic Word Concordance)
11		
12	YS	<i>Yājñavalkyasmṛti</i>
13	YV	<i>Yajurveda</i>
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Introduction

Narrative and Method

Yājñavalkya is perhaps the most important literary-historical figure in ancient India prior to the Buddha.¹ He is attested to throughout the late Vedic ritual, philosophical, Epic, and Purāṇic literature (8th century BCE and well into the common era)—specifically, in the *Śatapaṭha Brāhmaṇa* (ŚB), the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* (BĀU), the *Mahābhārata* (MBh), and various Purāṇas. The Hindu tradition views him as the founder of the White Yajurveda (YV) school of ritual practice, which he is said to have received from the Sun (*āditya*).² Further, he is credited with writing a legal treatise, the *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* (YS), and is considered one of India's earliest and best known thinkers. In secondary scholarship he is also associated with a number of firsts in Indian religious literary history: the first person to discuss *brahman* and *ātman* thoroughly; the first to put forth an (albeit limited) theory of *karma* and reincarnation; the first to renounce his household life; the first to dispute with women in religious debate (*brahmodya*); and the first to discuss religious and philosophical matters with his wife. Throughout early Indian history, then, Yājñavalkya was seen as a priestly bearer of ritual authority, a sage of mystical knowledge, and an innovative propagator of philosophical ideas and religious law. In modern times, for many in the tradition he personifies the hoary past of the Veda, Vedic orthodoxy, and the beginnings of Vedāntic philosophical discourse.

In spite of Yājñavalkya's significance in ancient Indian literary history, he has only been approached in limited studies through philosophical and positivist-historical lenses—that is, the early narratives of Yājñavalkya have been viewed as the beginnings of formal

1 philosophy and/or the emphasis has been placed on isolating the
2 “real” Yājñavalkya and his teachings.³ The later narratives concerning
3 Yājñavalkya have been treated perfunctorily, if at all, and are gener-
4 ally taken as “mythic” fabrications. Yājñavalkya has never been taken
5 seriously as a literary figure through the variety of texts in which he
6 appears and has not been given the treatment he deserves. This is all
7 the more ironic given that Yājñavalkya, because of his importance, is
8 mentioned in nearly every introductory text on Hinduism or work
9 on ancient Indian philosophy.⁴

10 The principal goal of this book is to analyze the early literary
11 and historical construction of Yājñavalkya as a cultural icon in late
12 Vedic, Epic, and Purānic literature⁵ and to discuss how Yājñavalkya
13 is composed and recomposed in religious texts in different historical
14 contexts with different (literary, doctrinal, and sociological) intentions.
15 Thus, I will critically analyze the early Yājñavalkya texts in regard to
16 both their literary *and* social components—that is, how literary and
17 lived worlds intersect in the construction of a social identity and
18 literary memory across time.

19

20

21 Literary Background

22

23 Who is Yājñavalkya and what is his literary portrayal? These questions
24 are central to this book and are dealt with at length in the following
25 chapters. It is, however, prudent to give a brief summary to frame
26 the narrative that is to follow.

27 Yājñavalkya first appears in the Brāhmaṇa literature (especially
28 the ŚB, ca. 8th century BCE), an ancient genre of hieratic commentary
29 devoted to ritual minutiae, stories, and myths—all of which have the
30 overall purpose of explaining the various sacrificial acts and their
31 relation to the gods, the phenomenal world, and humankind. He is
32 portrayed as a ritual specialist giving his opinion on a variety of ritual
33 actions and interpretations. Most of the passages are succinct and do
34 not provide any detailed information about this individual (such as
35 lineage, associations, etc.) nor do they provide much of a context. They
36 do, however, give a sense of Yājñavalkya’s character—a ritual specialist
37 with a tendency towards sarcasm or wit. The majority of the passages
38 are short, consisting of little more than a paragraph when translated
39 into English. The form these passages often take is a series of opinions
40

on a particular sacrificial point, although Yājñavalkya does appear in 1
a few passages where his statement or opinion is the only one given. 2

In the later books of SB we encounter longer narratives in which 3
Yājñavalkya is one of the principal characters, though shorter passages 4
do occur as well. It has been argued by some that these longer narratives 5
are more philosophical, indicating a shift from the earlier portrayal 6
of Yājñavalkya and are themselves perhaps “mythical.” It should be 7
pointed out, however, that while one may see a shift in the character 8
of Yājñavalkya, I show how the topics discussed are still intimately 9
tied to his previous portrayal (albeit perhaps more abstractly in some 10
cases) showing a clear attempt at consistency. Such longer narratives 11
also give us a context to Yājñavalkya’s appearance, something quite 12
obscure in the single passages which simply list various ritualists’ 13
opinions on some particular point. 14

In the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad* chapters 3 and 4 (ca. 6th century 15
BCE), Yājñavalkya is the central character in a rather lively public 16
debate and then in a private discussion, both set in the court of 17
Janaka, the famed king and sponsor.⁶ In the public debate of BĀU 18
3, other well-known ritual specialists have also gathered as well to 19
participate. This debate spans such topics as sacrifice, life, death, 20
and immortality, and climaxes with the rather dramatic defeat of the 21
famous ritualist Śākalya, thus establishing Yājñavalkya as the most 22
learned in the Vedas. Chapter 4 of BĀU shifts to a private religious 23
discussion between Yājñavalkya and Janaka and continues by elabo- 24
rating several of the themes presented in chapter 3. Chapter 4 then 25
concludes with an even more private discussion, presumably in the 26
domestic context, between Yājñavalkya and his wife, Maitreyī. In the 27
sixth and final chapter of BĀU, we are told that Yājñavalkya is viewed 28
as the founder of the White Yajurvedic school of ritual interpretation 29
and that he received the sacrificial formulae of the White Yajurveda 30
Saṃhitā from the Sun (āditya). 31

Yājñavalkya again appears in the *Mahābhārata* (MBh), the Epic 32
poem dated roughly between the 4th century BCE and 2nd century 33
CE.⁷ While he is mentioned only briefly in a few passages, we do 34
have one longer passage in the Śāntiparvan where Yājñavalkya is the 35
central figure. Here he is seen teaching Janaka the doctrine of Yoga- 36
Sāṃkhya, quite appropriate for this didactic book. Interestingly, after 37
Yājñavalkya teaches his version of this doctrine, we step out of this 38
dialogue proper and are told a story about how Yājñavalkya received 39
40

1 the White Yajurveda *and* composed or compiled the ŚB, a new detail
 2 in his biography.

3 Finally, Yājñavalkya appears in a number of Purānic texts, often
 4 in the context of explaining the origin of the Vedas. In these various
 5 texts we encounter what I show to be recompositions of earlier material.
 6 We also have different stories about how and why Yājñavalkya split
 7 with his teacher to form his own ritual school, how he had to purify
 8 himself to receive the White Yajurveda from the Sun, and how he is
 9 seen as the founder of the White Yajurvedic tradition. Details of these
 10 tellings are premised on the earlier stories, stories which must have
 11 come to constitute a more widely held literary world surrounding
 12 the figure of Yājñavalkya. The composers of these texts interpret the
 13 figure more freely than those before them, and the literary life of this
 14 figure greatly expands.

15 Throughout the expanse of the literature under question here,
 16 there are a number of topics and themes that will be revisited through-
 17 out the chapters of this book. First, Yājñavalkya's wit or sarcasm
 18 is quite particular to this literary figure and makes him unique in
 19 ancient Indian literature, particularly amongst philosophers. Even in
 20 the earliest material, such as the ŚB, we find Yājñavalkya associated
 21 with many instances of clever wordplays, short and witty retorts, and
 22 derisive statements towards other Brahmins or opinions. While such
 23 comments may not be solely limited to the figure of Yājñavalkya, their
 24 overwhelming prevalence here and in the later literature that exploits
 25 such a characterization, I argue, clearly defines him as a distinct liter-
 26 ary figure. In this sense, by looking at the use of sarcasm attributed
 27 to this figure, we see the foundation of his personality developing in
 28 the earliest literature.

29 In tracing the use (and nonuse) of this character trait diachronic-
 30 ally, an intriguing pattern starts to emerge. For example, in the early
 31 material the sarcasm associated with Yājñavalkya *only* appears in sit-
 32 uations where he is taken as authoritative by the tradition and not in
 33 situations where his opinion is an option or even disputed. I argue that
 34 this character trait of the figure of Yājñavalkya was viewed positively
 35 by the White Yajurvedic tradition and that his sarcasm was seen as
 36 justified by his correct (to their minds) interpretation of the matter at
 37 hand. This use of sarcasm develops and expands in the later books of
 38 ŚB and throughout the BĀU, culminating in Yājñavalkya's authority
 39 becoming absolute, when he begins to be portrayed as *always* correct
 40

in his opinion whether on ritual procedure, in public debate, or in 1
 private discussion. As sarcasm can be variously understood—such as 2
 humorous or rude—in this early context it might be best understood 3
 as “pride in correct knowledge,” as it was apparently a positive trait 4
 (he was, after all, correct in those interpretations) and the sarcasm 5
 adds rhetorical force to his authority. In fact, the sarcasm associated 6
 with Yājñavalkya positions him as an ideal spokesperson for a newly 7
 emerging tradition—authoritative in his own right, but particularly in 8
 deriding the establishment with which he was competing. 9

When we approach Yājñavalkya’s appearance in the MBh, his 10
 characterization changes; his character is still based on the same model 11
 of Yājñavalkya that was established in the early literature, but it is 12
 understood and deployed differently. Yājñavalkya’s characteristic wit 13
 appears relatively absent in the MBh tellings, but his authority has 14
 risen greatly. This may be because the White Yajurvedic tradition is 15
 no longer a new contender in the Vedic sacrificial world and derisive 16
 competition was less necessary, though its position may not yet be as 17
 secure as others as it is often portrayed as a historically “younger” 18
 Veda. Here, Yājñavalkya is portrayed as a *rishi* (sage) of the ancient 19
 past and is said to have been present in Indra’s heaven to perform 20
 the *rājasūya* (royal consecration ceremony). This mythical association 21
 authorizes him to perform the same rite for Yudhiṣṭhira on earth. It 22
 is clear that Yājñavalkya’s status has grown in the Brahminical world 23
 and this figure plays an integral role in various parts of the text. In a 24
 longer passage associated with Yājñavalkya, I suggest that a lack of 25
 his characteristic sarcasm from earlier material may have prompted 26
 hagiographical elaboration about how Yājñavalkya came to have 27
 knowledge of the White Yajurveda and what his relationship to the 28
 Sun god was. In this sense, even though the characteristic sarcasm is 29
 absent, the composers, in elaborating a story of Yājñavalkya’s past, 30
 are reminding us that we are still dealing with the same figure from 31
 the older literature. 32

In the Purāṇic material, this sarcastic trait is variously understood, 33
 sometimes negatively and sometimes positively. Given the depth of 34
 time between the Purānic compositions and those of the Vedic period, 35
 the composers had more liberty to explore his personality for their own 36
 ends. Here we encounter different stories that attempt to explain how 37
 Yājñavalkya could receive a “new” Veda (and what “new” means in 38
 the context of simultaneously being “ancient”) and how his person- 39
 40

1 ality played a role in that reception. In one text, it is suggested that
 2 Yājñavalkya's teacher misunderstood a statement by Yājñavalkya and
 3 was insulted. Yājñavalkya then appealed to the Sun god for a new
 4 Veda since he had been compelled to return the Black Yajurveda to
 5 his teacher. In another text, we are told that Yājñavalkya did, appar-
 6 ently intentionally, insult his teacher and had to undergo penance. His
 7 penance pleased the Sun to such a degree that the Sun god chose to
 8 grant him a new Veda. In another story, which is a retelling of the
 9 *Bṛhadāranyaka* story, Yājñavalkya is not sarcastic or arrogant at all, but
 10 all of the other Brahmins present in a public debate are said to have
 11 this trait. In this case, what could be understood as a negative trait
 12 associated with a particular *r̄si* is placed onto the other Brahmins in
 13 the debate and thus the character of Yājñavalkya is "sanitized" while
 14 inverting the moral message of the story.

15 The rather unique trait of sarcasm attributed to Yājñavalkya, as
 16 I argue throughout this book, is a defining trait that positioned him
 17 as particularly appropriate to be taken as the founder of the White
 18 Yajurvedic tradition. A close reading of the texts suggests that it is
 19 this characteristic that ideally situates him as the spokesperson for the
 20 tradition: he is a leader who can justify his own tradition's practices
 21 in contrast to an already established orthodoxy, even—or especially—if
 22 that means denigrating others in the process. It is, however, also a
 23 trait that the tradition had to reconcile itself with once the tradition
 24 and its founder became established. In the later literary traditions (the
 25 Purāṇas), the composers are concerned with this unique trait, in part
 26 because they lacked the same agonistic need of the earlier tradition.
 27 In these cases, we find that their interest lies in explaining his sarcasm
 28 or arrogance, especially how such an ambivalent trait can be associ-
 29 ated with such a renowned sage.⁸ Some of these texts try to explain
 30 this characteristic away ("it was based on a misunderstanding") or
 31 elaborate how, if viewed as a character flaw, it can be overcome (such
 32 as through penance).

33 A second related theme that we find throughout the literature on
 34 Yājñavalkya is his association with other, newer religious traditions or
 35 practices. For example, from the MBh onward Yājñavalkya is associated
 36 with apparently different traditions of *yoga*. While the earliest mate-
 37 rial does not discuss Yājñavalkya in relation to *yoga*—it is likely that
 38 a distinct mainstream tradition as such did not exist at the time—it
 39 appears that Yājñavalkya's authority is being put to a different use
 40

in later material. Here we find that his philosophical discussions on 1
the nature of the self (*ātman*) and the universal principle (*brahman*) 2
from the earlier material are reinterpreted in the context of mental 3
and physical conditioning that are supposed to aid in the realization 4
of certain larger truths. 5

As Yājñavalkya is associated with a new Yajurveda, he paradoxically 6
becomes viewed as an ancient *rishi*. Here I argue that Yājñavalkya 7
becomes emblematic of “the new within the ancient” and his association 8
with *yoga* and other traditions is a means of claiming ancient 9
authority for newly developing traditions. This becomes particularly 10
clear in the Purāṇas where there is the dual concern of explaining 11
the origin of Yājñavalkya (as a “new” sage among ancient ones) with 12
newly emerging (or newly “Sanskritizing”) traditions devoted to Śiva 13
or Rāma or valorizing apparently new rites or pilgrimages. As such, 14
the character of Yājñavalkya becomes a means to put the present 15
into the past to make a claim to authority for a tradition. To put this 16
another way: a “new” sage is made “old,” but then his new “oldness” 17
is utilized to claim “oldness” for other newly developing traditions, 18
thus creating a mutually reinforcing temporal circle. In this way, the 19
ancient may newly appear in the world, but its newness becomes an 20
ironic feature in the creation of authority, rather than a bug. 21

Another central theme in the literature is how Yājñavalkya 22
becomes seen as an idealized priest in relation to kings. In the ŚB 23
we see the beginning of this association with King Janaka, himself an 24
idealized king who sponsors Brahmins and, at least on one occasion, 25
is said to know more than Brahmins about a particular rite and its 26
significance. In the BĀU, Yājñavalkya is closely associated with Janaka, 27
and he proves himself to be the wisest Brahmin at a debate held 28
at Janaka’s court. Later in the same text it is said that Yājñavalkya 29
teaches Janaka about the nature of life, death, and the cosmos in a 30
private discussion. In later literature, Yājñavalkya appears often with 31
Janaka, but he also is associated with other kings as well. His kingly 32
associations parallel his ritual associations with the *aśvamedha* (royal 33
horse sacrifice) and the *rājasūya* (royal consecration), emphasizing the 34
dependent relationship of kings and Brahmins. 35

From these precedents, there are suggestive reasons why 36
Yājñavalkya becomes associated with the legal tradition (*dharmaśāstra*) 37
where his name is attributed to a particular legal text (the *Yājñavalkyasmṛti*). Based on a comparison with the figure of Manu and 38
40

1 the famous legal text attributed to him, I argue that Yājñavalkya
2 fulfills a similar ideological function as Manu, albeit from the other
3 side of the dominant *varṇa* coin. While Manu is an idealized king,
4 Yājñavalkya has become an idealized Brahmin, specifically through
5 his relationships with kings, and both represent class-based claims to
6 a tradition of *dharma*.

7 Finally, the major concern of this book is how we can trace the
8 life of a literary figure across time and texts and how we can query
9 these recompositions for what they tell us, not only about how a larger
10 tradition developed out of a smaller one, but also about how various
11 people understood this figure in recomposing him. By viewing the
12 recomposition of Yājñavalkya as a literary figure in different litera-
13 ture, we are granted a window into the concerns and motivations of
14 those later compositions. If we view these recompositions as a form of
15 commentary on earlier literary productions, we can analyze these later
16 traditions in a new manner. We can look at what aspects of an earlier
17 narrative were known and/or were important to different composers by
18 looking at hagiographical expansion (such as later narratives focused on
19 Yājñavalkya's wives or on the origins of the Vedas), hagiographical inver-
20 sion (such as the narrative of Yājñavalkya's sarcasm being transposed
21 onto others), and hagiographical contraction (such as removing certain
22 details altogether or collapsing a story to focus on one particular part).

23 It is in the historically later narratives that the figure of Yājñavalkya
24 becomes an increasingly well-known figure—both because the audience
25 progressively widens in the transition between genres in the oral liter-
26 ature and also due to a broadening creative license on the part of the
27 authors to explore or expand on those literary precedents. This does
28 not mean that later composers were not bound to collectively held
29 notions of who this figure was, but that certain genres and contexts
30 allowed for a certain freedom in how those authors might compose
31 or recompose. I suggest that we think of this process as the “literary
32 memory” that these composers had of Yājñavalkya—a ritualist, a
33 debater with a strong wit, and a philosopher with two wives—where
34 the authors were not necessarily rigidly bound to a specific textual
35 tradition, but were apparently well aware of it and found different
36 means to work within its larger contours for their own ends.

37 By talking about the “life” of a literary figure, we are also talking
38 about the lives of various individuals who found this literary figure
39 interesting, useful, or religiously compelling for any number of different
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reasons. This diachronic and narratological approach to the figure of Yājñavalkya is, as far as I am aware, the first of its kind. Generally speaking, portrayals of Yājñavalkya beyond the early material have been simply dismissed by scholars or rather perfunctorily treated. In fact, I would argue that exploring how a figure attains such a status, and more so, what such a status means, grants a unique view into how particular ancient Indians understood their tradition. Further, to dismiss the narratives as myth or the like ignores the fact that there are many different stories about Yājñavalkya coming from many different traditions which grants a view into how *different* people used the figure in their compositions for *different* ends.

“Literary Lives”

I have argued elsewhere as a devil’s advocate against scholarship that attempts to find a “real” Yājñavalkya within the literary presentation of this figure in an effort to illuminate the problems with such approaches.⁹ This book begins with the assumption that, given the current state of scholarship, the search for a historical individual in this case will only produce very limited results. While I do not think that such studies should be abandoned altogether, more sophisticated theoretical models need to be developed if one wishes to pursue this route. What is necessary in such attempts is an analysis of how narrative and history are interrelated as well as an explicit discussion about the criteria used to determine if something can be considered “legend,” “myth,” or “fact.” As I have shown (Lindquist 2011b), no attempt so far has been adequately able to demarcate a “real” Yājñavalkya—more often than not, the logic employed to do so can simply be turned on itself or equally compelling alternatives can be given. Further, a more sophisticated view of literature must be adopted by those concerned with the early material as regards the notion of narrative or narrativeness, that is formal characteristics that make certain speech into narratives. As is well accepted, if not always analyzed, all speech is motivated to some end, whether that end is rather banal or more insidious (from pleasantries, to sharing of information, to an attempt to convince or deceive). Any narrative, whether told for the first time or repeated for generations, takes on formal literary structures and employs narrative devices which do not necessarily say anything

1 about its historicity, but do speak to the motivations of composers.
2 These devices do not mean that what is being told is historically true
3 or not, but it does mean that the speech is motivated towards various
4 ends and narrative structures and devices are employed to support
5 those ends. As Roland Barthes (1972), among others, has shown, we
6 are always surrounded by narrativity whether it be in our speech
7 acts, our advertising, our view of our own individual lives, or in our
8 other cultural productions. Unlike others concerned with Yājñavalkya,
9 I take the nature of these narratives as the starting point of analysis,
10 rather than as the conclusion.

11 The early textual evidence as we have it does not appear to lend
12 itself, as far as I can determine, to the drawing of a firm line between
13 who is the “real” historical Yājñavalkya and who is not. While there
14 most likely was a real historical individual at some point in early
15 Indian history, where to determine the beginning and the end of a
16 “person” in the early literature remains analytically unclear.

17 For my purposes, I take the portrayal of Yājñavalkya in the
18 literature as a *literary* figure. Within the confines of literature, we can
19 compare and evaluate the various portrayals to analyze who this
20 figure was as part of the literary imagination of ancient Indians and
21 how that literary imagination creates a literary memory over time.
22 Rather than proposing any grander theory to explain legend, myth,
23 or mythic development, the following chapters look at the various
24 ways that a series of narratives (i.e., those surrounding Yājñavalkya)
25 and history (the contexts, whether material or ideological) intersect.
26 Dominick LaCapra (1994) has made the useful heuristic distinction
27 between the “documentary” and the “work-like” aspects of a text,
28 where the former is the object of sociological and historical scrutiny
29 and the latter the object of literary criticism. Following this bifurcation,
30 I will analyze certain historical developments in early Indian history
31 and their relationship to textual production. Thus, by avoiding entirely
32 the question of a “real Yājñavalkya,” the focus of this monograph is
33 *what Yājñavalkya represents, to whom, and why*. Such a focus allows us
34 to view the development of Yājñavalkya as a literary figure across
35 time and contexts. We can, by approaching Yājñavalkya as a literary
36 figure, analyze the pronouncements and stories attributed to him as
37 well as the motivations of the communities who preserved these texts
38 as indicative of various (historical) concerns, ideas, and beliefs. Thus,
39 by not searching for the “authentic” person or teaching, this book
40 looks at what people believed and why across time.

In this fashion, a literary view of Yājñavalkya focuses on aspects 1 of the texts which have been largely overlooked.¹⁰ For example: we 2 can analyze plot, character, literary structures and devices, themes 3 and thematic change, and note the use of hyperbole, sarcasm, and 4 narrative tension. More importantly, we can analyze what all this tells 5 us not only about the rise to authority of a particular figure, but also 6 about those communities that created and maintained these stories 7 in a variety of genres. 8

Chapter 1 is concerned with Yājñavalkya in the earliest literature, the ŚB. In this chapter, I deal with Yājñavalkya in two sections: 9 his portrayal in ŚBM (Mādhyandina) books 1–5 and then in books 10 11 12 13 14 15 16 17 18 19 20 21 22 23 24 25 26 27 28 29 30 31 32 33 34 35 his “sarcastic” nature. It is here that I elaborate the contours of what constitutes “sarcasm” in the context of this figure. Moreover, I will propose a topography of the statements attributed to Yājñavalkya, which shows that not only was Yājñavalkya *not always* authoritative in his pronouncements, but that the authoritativeness and sarcasm attributed to him increases in parallel fashion across the texts. I also discuss the historical reasons for this development: as the tradition of the White Yajurveda was establishing itself in the frontier north-eastern region, it needed a spokesman for what must have been seen as a fringe tradition. In this fashion, Yājñavalkya’s sarcastic portrayal serves as an ideal soapbox for this tradition—one which not only establishes the White Yajurveda as a legitimate sacrificial school, but also one which criticizes, even mocks, the then current western (Kuru-Pañcāla) establishment. In the later books of ŚB, I will also suggest that a template of Yājñavalkya has begun to be established—that is, the character and narrative basis that will influence most, though not necessarily all, of his other literary portrayals. Chapter 1 is furnished with more philological rigor than the following chapters, but as I explain below, this is unavoidable.

Chapter 2 analyzes the most important text associated with Yājñavalkya, the *Bṛhadāraṇyaka Upaniṣad*. It is in this text that Yājñavalkya is found in an elaborate narrative about the nature of the sacrifice (*yajña*), life, death, the self, and rebirth. This text, similar to narratives found in later ŚB books, comprises a lively debate, but

1 with rather deadly consequences. Not only will I discuss the various
2 passages and their meaning, but I will also focus on how the text
3 coheres as a whole. I will investigate the thematic links between the
4 sections and how the various sections develop a single coherent plot
5 and climax (BĀU 3), followed by a distinct but interrelated continuation
6 of these themes (BĀU 4). I propose that the entire Yājñavalkyāñā,
7 while not a single narrative, is a series of narratives that thematically
8 coheres as a larger “teaching narrative.” This teaching narrative pro-
9 gresses through BĀU 3 and 4 coinciding with an increasing privacy in
10 the contexts of these teachings (from the public to the private court,
11 concluding with a private dialogue between a husband and wife).

12 In this chapter, I will also discuss the various literary devices
13 which serve to hold this narrative together. Particular attention will
14 be paid to how the BĀU account is consistent with the portrayal of
15 Yājñavalkya in the ŚB, not necessarily suggesting a real individual,
16 but certainly suggesting an attempt at consistency on the part of the
17 literary tradition. It is here too that the topography of sarcasm and
18 authority from chapter 1 will be discussed anew: I show that the
19 authority attributed to Yājñavalkya, coupled with his characteristic
20 sarcasm, is a firmly established pairing. While this trait begins in
21 the ŚB, the notion of “pride in correct knowledge” is entrenched by
22 BĀU—that is, all sarcastic expressions are justified in context based
23 on the fact that Yājñavalkya is *always* correct in his interpretations of
24 the sacrifice, life, death, and rebirth. Further, I show that this “phil-
25 osophical” text is ultimately polemical—it is inherently an *argument*
26 *against* western forms of ritual understanding and an *argument for* the
27 newly establishing/established eastern hegemony.

28 A subsection in chapter 2 is devoted to women in the BĀU, as
29 this is the first literary occurrence of women involved in abstract, phil-
30 osophical debate. This section focuses on how gender is constructed
31 in this text and how the role of women is related to the portrayal of
32 Yājñavalkya and the larger narrative. Another section in this chapter
33 concerns the interpretation of BĀU 3.9.28, a riddle-poem which has
34 caused problems for scholars and the indigenous tradition alike. As
35 this riddle-poem is the conclusion of the debate of BĀU 3, it is neces-
36 sary to take a fresh look at what it may mean, particularly regarding
37 the nature of rebirth. This is particularly important, because contrary
38 to common opinion (e.g., Horsch 1966), a close reading shows that
39 Yājñavalkya is clearly associated with a newly emerging idea of rebirth.
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The first two chapters, particularly chapter 1, are the most philologically detailed chapters in the book. Though I am sympathetic to the nonspecialist reader, I hope he or she will understand that this was unavoidable for two main reasons. First, at the heart of this book is the methodological principle that stories need to be taken seriously in their appropriate linguistic and historical context. As such, close linguistic and textual scrutiny is the hallmark of all that follows. Because of this, primary text and translation is employed throughout the body of the text (and separately as an appendix for the whole of chapters 3 and 4 of the BĀU), not only to justify my own interpretations, but also to give the reader an appreciation for the interpretive complexity that is involved. This linguistic and textual scrutiny, though, is most intense where the language or larger context is obscure. This is particularly true of the *brāhmaṇa* material in chapter 1. Since *brāhmaṇas* are ritual technical manuals for the early Vedic practitioner, they assume a knowing audience—an audience intimately familiar with a vast array of religious texts and practices which are obscure not only to the nonspecialist, but often also to the specialist separated by thousands of years and miles. I spend a significant part of chapter 1 teasing out the plausible context and meaning of these passages, which often requires teasing out the meaning of individual phrases or words.

A second reason that this level of detail is unavoidable in these chapters, in this case especially in the textual analysis of chapter 2, is that the literary background of Yājñavalkya becomes established here, and later composers explicitly and implicitly refer to it in their compositions. Chapter 2 discusses the literarily and historically most important narratives about Yājñavalkya found in the BĀU. My close literary analysis of this text not only *lays out* the groundwork of my own chapters that follow, but also *is* the groundwork for the composers of the later portrayals of this figure. I argue that this text codifies a template of this figure, and it is this template that later authors draw upon, even when challenging or circumventing it. This template, then, must be understood in detail in order to understand those later literary developments. Since my interpretations are tied intimately to my understanding of the primary text, the text and translation (including notes) of BĀU 3–4 are included in a separate appendix. This is done not only to give access to the larger narrative to the nonspecialist reader, but to lay bare my interpretative moves to specialists.

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1 The reader who is not familiar with Sanskrit or early India is
 2 advised to not become bogged down in the philological details of these
 3 chapters. In order to assist in this, each chapter has several thematic
 4 sections which are intended to both focus on some of the most inter-
 5 esting details in these sections (such as the use of sarcasm attributed
 6 to Yājñavalkya or the historical anomaly of females participating in
 7 what were normally all-male arenas) and also provide brief summaries
 8 to create a broader picture of this literary figure. If a larger picture is
 9 the goal, the details create and justify that picture. The reader should
 10 be rewarded in the chapters that follow, not because that material
 11 is uncomplicated or less interesting, but because those passages are
 12 predicated on the earlier material and are also less complicated phil-
 13 logically, at least for my purposes.

14 In chapter 3, I consider the role of Yājñavalkya in the MBh. I
 15 analyze and discuss the brief references throughout certain books of
 16 this text. Particularly, I focus on the one long narrative concerning
 17 Yājñavalkya and how, at least on an initial reading, his appearance
 18 seems anomalous—he is teaching the metaphysics of Yoga and
 19 Sāṃkhya, doctrines he has never been associated with before. How-
 20 ever, I show how Yājñavalkya's appearance is not so anomalous after
 21 all. Yājñavalkya's main appearance is principally in the Śāntiparvan, a
 22 later didactic text which focuses especially on Yoga and Sāṃkhya, but
 23 it is also a text concerned with justifying new teachings under older,
 24 more established garb. Thus, by the time of the MBh, Yājñavalkya
 25 was established as a sage of the past and new doctrines are being
 26 attributed to his authority, making a claim to ancient precedence.

27 It is also in the MBh where the first discernible hagiographical
 28 tendencies concerning Yājñavalkya begin. The MBh contains a story
 29 about how Yājñavalkya broke away from his teacher of the Black
 30 Yajurveda, how he purified himself for his transgression against his
 31 *guru*, how he received the White Yajurveda from the Sun for his pen-
 32 ance, and how and why he compiled or composed the ŚB. This story
 33 itself also seems, at first glance, anomalous with respect to Yājñavalkya's
 34 larger teaching on Yoga-Sāṃkhya as it is not thematically related and
 35 appears simply attached to the end. While it may be that this passage
 36 is a later addition, I suggest that it is an intentional, necessary part of
 37 the longer passage. The reason for this, I argue, is that this passage
 38 in the MBh has fundamentally altered the template of Yājñavalkya
 39 established in the ŚB and the BĀU. As I show in chapters 1 and 2,
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a foundational characteristic of Yājñavalkya that is developed is his 1 sarcasm. In the MBh, Yājñavalkya's sarcastic wit is nowhere to be 2 found—in fact, Yājñavalkya appears almost without a personality, a 3 perhaps reverential portrayal of a venerated sage. This longer passage 4 is a dry listing of the fundamental tenets of a particular view of Yoga- 5 Sāṃkhya, which is purely didactic and Yājñavalkya might appear to 6 be little more than a mouth to put that teaching into. It is here that 7 I suggest that there was a perceived need for the inclusion of a brief 8 hagiography, as well as the ascription of the White Yajurveda and the 9 ŚB to Yājñavalkya, *because of* the lack of sarcasm or apparent connec- 10 tion to his earlier portrayal and association with ritual. This is to say 11 that there is a lack of connection to the template that had previously 12 defined Yājñavalkya as a literary character so a connection had to be 13 forged through hagiography. Not only does this passage serve as an 14 entertaining conclusion to the discussion of Yoga-Sāṃkhya (perhaps 15 one of its intents, given its dry nature), but it also makes clear that 16 we are dealing with *the same literary figure* found in the ŚB and the 17 BĀU, something otherwise not necessarily obvious. 18

While chapter 3 discusses what appears to be the first clear hagi- 19 graphical trend in any Yājñavalkya narrative, the narrative shows that 20 by this period Yājñavalkya was an established figure, even an ancient 21 *ṛsi*. In chapter 4, I will discuss how this hagiographical trend is greatly 22 expanded in the Purāṇic ("legendary/historical") accounts. As I will 23 demonstrate, the Purāṇic narratives about Yājñavalkya center on five 24 major themes: (1) retellings of the BĀU/ŚB; (2) a concern with names 25 and origins (specifically, the division of the Vedas and the perceived 26 split between the White and Black Yajurveda); (3) Yājñavalkya in 27 relation to *yoga*; (4) the relationship of kings and Brahmins; and (5) 28 Yājñavalkya in relation to the *dharmaśāstra* tradition. 29

Analyzing these five themes, I argue, allows us not only an 30 insight into what stories, narrative structures, and character portrayals 31 these authors were familiar with from the earlier sources, but they also 32 grant us a view into how later composers understood the previous 33 narratives in the composing of their own. Reading these later stories 34 as explicitly or implicitly based on earlier ones allows us to view these 35 later compositions as a form of commentary, granting us insight into 36 how this figure was interpreted and reinterpreted across time. 37

Chapter 4 concludes with the all-too-brief ascription of the 38 *Yājñavalkyasmṛti* to Yājñavalkya. As the evidence is extremely meager, I 39 40

1 only tentatively suggest possible reasons why this text was ascribed to
2 him based on a comparison with the figure of Manu and a composite
3 view of Yājñavalkya across time.

4 This book then concludes with “Yājñavalkya and Ancient Indian
5 Literary Memory.” Recently, it has been shown that it can be fruitful
6 to view Indian images as having “lives.”¹¹ This is to say that images
7 are reinvented and reinscribed with meaning over time—depending on
8 their context, both physical (such as how and where they are installed)
9 and more abstract (such as how they are offered to, and venerated
10 by, particular communities). Like images, religious-literary figures
11 also have “lives,” here the lives within a particular story or cluster of
12 stories, but also lives across time and space which are reinvented and
13 reinscribed with meaning depending on the needs and motivations of
14 the particular communities that maintain, venerate, and elaborate the
15 narratives surrounding such figures.¹² This book is, at its base, about
16 how these two “lives” intersect.

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